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AUTHOR Bowes, John E.; Zandpour, Freidoun
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ABSTRACT

To examine the congruency between voters' personal agendas and the perceived agendas of candidates, 160 college students interviewed repeatedly during the 1980 presidential campaign were asked to rate both the importance they assigned and the importance they felt each candidate assigned to eight major campaign issues. The influence of the election news, the televised debates, and the perceived credibility of candidates' statements and advertisements on the agenda effect were considered. Absolute differences between subjects' rating of issue importance and their perceptions of candidates' rating of issue importance were summed and averaged for each candidate across the eight issue scales. After the data from subjects who had participated in only one of the three or four surveys were removed, agenda congruency measures for the second and third studies were used to index relative agenda effect. The results showed an overall increase in agenda congruency as election day approached, especially between subjects and the candidates they preferred, and a loss of congruency following the election. Subjects tended to perceive candidates' agendas as moving toward their own agendas rather than the reverse. Further research is needed on the impact of the agenda effect on political campaigns. (Extensive tables are included.) (MM)

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POLITICAL AGENDA, THE INDIVIDUAL AND CONGRUENCY

by

John E. Bowes

and

Freidoun Zandpour

University of Washington
School of Communications
Seattle, WA 98195

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John Bowes and Fred Zandpour are, respectively, Associate Professor and Doctoral Candidate at the University of Washington. Professor Bowes is currently on Sabbatical leave as a visiting lecturer at the National Institute for Higher Education, Dublin.

POLITICAL AGENDA, THE INDIVIDUAL AND CONGRUENCY

U.S. presidential campaigns have become a showcase for national issues. Candidates position themselves as the solution to most of the nation's important problems. Vietnam, law and order, inflation, honesty in government and government spending have been key ingredients of the past presidential marketing efforts. Candidates do not merely tell us their position on issues; they try to sell us on the importance of issues. Each candidate hopes to bring the voter to his set of priorities (Bowers, 1977; Becker, 1977). This influence on individual priorities has been studied in the context of media influence through "agenda-setting" (Shaw and McCombs, 1977; Sohn, 1978; Win[illegible] and Eyal, 1981).

Agenda-setting research has investigated the similarity between the public agenda and media agenda. Field survey techniques have been used to assess the former, while content analyses have been used to identify the latter. The results have been used to infer possible causal relationships between the two agendas (Shaw and McCombs, 1977; Kraus and Davis, 1976; Eyal, Winter, and DeGeorge, 1981).

The literature suggests that the impressions the voter derives from televised debates, advertising and other campaign contact, depend on the mechanism involved. For social scientists who hold televised debates and advertising

to be powerful influences in shaping one's impression of candidates, the outcome of elections are determined by the candidates' promotional activities. Kenneth Boulding (1961), for example, holds that "...behavior depends on the image." (p. 6). In this view, messages change images which, in turn, affect individual behavior. One's political reality may be a construction based on such images, largely served up by the media. Possibly less strongly put, but similar in implication, is Boorstin's (1961) notion of staged "pseudo" events and other manufactured news which draws favorable media attention to a candidate or special interest. As well, a long history of research suggests the strength of media news in directing the public attention devoted to particular issues and candidates; Lazarsfeld and Merton (in Schramm, 1960), Robinson (1974), Lippmann (1922), McCombs and Shaw (1972), O'Brien, et al. (1971). In a few words, this mechanism is "stimulus-based."

Another frequently suggested mechanism is that the influences of debates, political commercials and other campaign rhetoric are heavily mediated by partisan affiliations and standing vote intentions. Thus, inputs from various campaign information sources will be "conditioned" by a need to keep them harmonious with partisan beliefs, candidate choice and prior experience. This influence of one's own beliefs, values and attitudes is attested by a long research tradition examining cognitive consistency (Rosenberg, 1953, 1960a, 1960b), conflict and dissonance (Festinger, 1957, 1964), belief congruency

(Rokeach and Rothman, 1965), and congruity (Osgood and Tannenbaum, 1955). These mechanisms have been summarized as "perceiver-determined" (Nimmo and Savage, 1976; Sigel, 1964).

Little attention, however, has been given to assessing what possible interplay these two mechanisms might have. Sigel (1964) suggests, for example, that perception of candidates is stimulus-determined when one considers personality or appearance, and is perceiver-determined (especially by partisan inclinations) when the candidates's stand on political issues is examined. Garramone (1982), based on the impression formation literature, notes that candidates perceptions are more likely to be perceiver-determined when the voter is paying more attention to the candidate's personality than when paying more attention to specific detail from an advertisement. But beyond these descriptions, the two mechanisms are treated as contrasting, competing explanations without regard to their possible joint interplay.

A number of investigations have shown that indeed individuals change their perceptions of candidates and issues during a campaign period (Carter, 1962; Katz and Feldman, 1971; Bowes and Strentz, 1978).

Stimulus and perceiver mechanisms might be more constructively viewed as opposing extremes on a continuous gradient, rather than as competing, mutually exclusive explanations (Nimmo, 1976). Bowes and Strentz (1978) describe "congruency" in this context as the converging over

time of the voter's own views on the importance of campaign issues (voter's agenda) and those he or she perceives to be that of the candidate's (candidate's agenda). This idea of "agenda congruency" as based on "perceived cognitive overlap" or congruency described by Chaffee, et al (1969), was used to assess the shift in perceived overlap between voters and candidates as an election campaign progressed.

This process was measured by Bowes and Strentz (1978) at the time of the presidential debates. Figure 1 shows progressive movement over the campaign period toward increasing congruence between voter's agenda and perceived candidates' agenda, especially with the favored candidate of this mid-Iowa sample--Gerald Ford. Increased exposure to the opposition candidate, Carter, also brought increased agenda congruency which was progressively apparent until the last survey conducted two days before the election. Comparing similar data for the 1980 presidential campaign (Figure 2), a variant pattern is shown (which will be discussed in more detail later), but one which still shows a general shift towards increased agenda congruency.

The principal goal of the present study was to examine the agenda congruency between the voter's own agenda and his perceived agenda of the candidate. The two variables were placed against each other in analysis and their relative contributions to the agenda congruency were identified. In short, we compared the relative degree of shift over time between the voter's own evaluation of issue importance and

that perceived by the voter to be the candidate's on the same set of issues. Where agenda congruency was in evidence together with a greater shift by the voter's agenda toward the candidate's perceived agenda, there would be a greater degree of candidates's agenda effect. With greater shift of the candidate's perceived agenda toward the voter's own agenda, there would be greater voter's agenda effect. There were a few instances where voter's own agenda and perceived candidates's agenda diverged over time in contrast to the normative pattern found in Figures 1 and 2. For the purpose of this study these few cases were excluded.

The view held in many of the above mentioned studies is that media use and credence granted information sources affects greatly the level of candidates' effect. Thus, several classes of questions were considered for their influence on relative agenda effect from the individual's perspective.

1. Did high attention to election news, the televised debates and campaign advertisementsincrease the level of candidate's agenda effect?
2. Did favorable attitudes toward information sources--particularly the perceived credibility of candidate's statements and campaign ads--increase the level of the candidate's agenda effect?
3. Did favorable attitudes toward, and interest in the debates increase the extent of candidate's agenda effect?

METHODOLOGY

Respondents were selected from undergraduate courses at Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa. Some 160 students were interviewed repeatedly during the 1980 presidential election campaign. A panel design was constructed so that a given respondent was interviewed at four times throughout the 1980 presidential campaign. The first wave (time 1) was conducted after the summer nominating conventions, in early September; the second (time 2), following the first debate between Reagan and Anderson; the third (time 3), following the second debate between Reagan and Carter; and the fourth survey (time 4), two days following the election itself. Similarly, the data presented in Figure 1 (the 1976 election study) were collected prior to and after each of three debates between Ford and Carter. No questionnaire was administered after this election. In both studies, procedures were identical. Respondents were asked to rate the importance they assigned to eight major campaign issues developed from a pretest study and editorial content analysis (see Bowes and Strentz, 1976). As well, respondents were asked to rate the importance they felt each candidate assigned to the same set of issues. Importance was rated on a 10-step scale attached to each issue ranging from 1 (not important) to 10 (very important).

Agenda congruency was measured in both the 1976 study and the 1980 version by comparing for each subject the absolute difference between his rating of each presidential candidate on each issue scale with the importance he,

himself, assigned to the issue. These differences were summed up and averaged for each candidate across the eight issue scales. Low values thus indicate high overlap or high agenda congruency.

Agenda congruency measures for the second and third studies were used to index relative agenda effect because, as can be seen in Figure 2 (time 2 vs. time 3), the maximum shift occurred in the interval ending immediately before election day. For the purpose of these calculations only the instances of congruency were considered.

As well, given the change measures central to the relative effect index, it was necessary to remove those who had participated in only one of the time 3 or 4 surveys.

The calculations involved in the relative agenda effect are shown schematically in Figure 3. In the hypothetical example offered, the resultant effect is +1.0 (i.e., distance A - distance B). Such differences for each subject were summed up and averaged across the eight issue scales based on comparisons for the three major candidates: Reagan, Carter and Anderson. Thus, three summary relative congruency effect values were developed for each respondent meeting the aforementioned selection criteria.

Questions were constructed which assessed frequency of information source use for general election news and debates, attitudes and interest toward the debates, and attitude toward candidates and campaign advertisements as credible information sources. The actual questions used are listed in Appendix J and are summarized in Table 3.

RESULTS

Agenda Congruency:

The pattern in Figures 1 and 2, as previously mentioned, shows an overall increase in agenda congruency as election day approached. This is especially apparent for Ford in the 1976 study and for all candidates in the 1980 study. These findings may suggest an increasing candidates' effect in the latter stages of the campaign as respondents may have had cumulatively more exposure to all of them discussing the same issues. This is in agreement with the findings of Weaver, Graber, McCombs, and Eyal (1981, that shortly before the election date, voters appear to become highly interested in issues. The cumulative nature of agenda-setting has also been shown by Stone (1975) and Shaw and McCombs (1975). The post election loss of agenda congruence is most interesting. One possible explanation would be a candidate's effect, i.e., the winner explicitly claims importance on an issue with which the respondent disagrees. The losers also articulate reasons about the importance of some issue which the respondent disagrees with. A second explanation would be that a voter's effect, having voted for a candidate, the respondent changes his or her own agenda to correspond to the candidate voted for, but away from the two not voted for. Another candidate's effect would be that respondent changes the rating of the candidate more than his or her own ratings for all the three candidates.

The results in Table 1 show that agenda congruency was greatest with one's candidate of choice. Reagan, Carter and Anderson voters were consistently more congruent on issues with their favored candidate than with the others at all time points. These results are in line with the findings of Shapiro (1969), Repass (1971), and McLeod (1974).

Relative Agenda Effect

Table 2 shows relative congruency effects for the three presidential candidates by voter choice. It is clear that the strong effect toward congruence evidenced in Table 1 for chosen candidates does not reflect in relative agenda congruency. Throughout, respondents tended to move perceived candidate's agendas toward their own agenda rather than the obverse. This shift was greatest for Carter voters' perceptions of Anderson and least for Reagan voters' for Carter and Anderson.

Use and attitudes toward sources of information did show some influence on relative agenda effect. The results presented in Table 3 show with stability four relationships with information sources and attitudes toward their use. Reading election information in the press and discussing possible choices with family and friends at a time immediately prior to election day (time 3) showed less shift in candidate's agenda and more shift in voter's agenda than for those not engaging in this kind of communication activity. Further, those who early in the campaign admitted that TV advertisements helped them to know candidates

better, also showed significantly more shift to voter's agenda. Finally, those who said debates helped change their mind about candidates showed far greater levels of perceived candidate agenda shift toward congruency.

Several distinctions are noteworthy for their lack of relationship. Those who agreed that debates helped them to choose a candidate showed no real shift in relative agenda effect. Nor did the debates alter relative agenda effect when respondents agreed the debates changed their mind on issues. Neither campaign advertisements nor viewing of debates on television had a discernible influence on relative agenda efffect. The time at which the respondent reported making his choice also had little influence (see Table 3, last row).

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this exploratory study was to show if campaign information and attitudes toward it affected the manner by which increasing agenda congruency was achieved by voters over the course of the 1980 presidential campaign.

High attention to campaign information--either exposure to the debates or more common news reports--produced consistent, if only partially significant results in a statistical sense. Exposure to election information in the press was strongest in relation to relative agenda effect while conversation about choice for president (vote) showed a marginal relationship. The suggestion here is that discussion and media exposure cause increased shift of

voter's agenda toward the perceived candidate's agenda as s/he has more contact with external information sources and their possible persuasive effect.

Only one of the items concerning attitudes towards information sources showed a stable relationship with relative agenda effect. People who agree that television advertisements helped them to know candidates better changed their agenda decidedly toward the perceived candidate's agenda. Their acceptance of these messages is reflected in their greater shift toward the perceived candidate's agenda.

Respondents who considered that debates had changed their mind on candidates achieved congruence largely through a shift of the perceived candidate's agenda toward their own agenda. The suggestion in this result is that rather than respondents actually shifting their agenda toward the perceived candidate's agenda, the candidate's agenda is perceived as increasingly agreeable on the voter's terms. The implication then, is that debates do not really educate and change voter's agendas, but rather reveal to those watching that candidates really aren't very different from themselves. This result stands in clear distinction to the trend for information used by this study's respondents--to foster increased shift toward what is perceived as the candidate's agenda.

No similar influence on relative agenda effect was apparent for the debates' presumed influence in changing one's agenda.

It should be noted that no stable relationship was found between those candidates respondents judged to have "won" or performed better in the debates and relative agenda effect. Debate "winners" were no better at draving the respondents toward their perceived agenda than those who lost. This outcome further reinforces the idea that debates show the candidate's agenda as similar to the respondent's rather than shifting the voter's agenda toward the perceived candidate's agenda.

Exposure to the debates on TV had no influence as well. The possibility that other sources of information so fully covered what had happened, that isolating the effects of TV exposure really could show little independent effect.

Several problems with this study of relative agenda effect in congruency need emphasis, both as a caution to interpretation of findings and to show the needs of future study:

1. It was not possible to get sufficient variance on interest level in the election from this sample of journalism students--it was uniformly high. Possibly with a less obtrusive measure, interest level would have been shown to vary. Press readership of election information, for example, could be a reflection of interest as well, given the greater effort required to select and read information in contrast to its passive consumption from television.

2. The sample used presents a number of problems, especially with questions so vulnerable to age and social milieu. The sample was young, with a mean age of 20, and all were students attending a Mid-western university. Ties to political parties, the development of political judgment based on long-time familiarity with recurrent issues, and the self-selection of introductory level journalism students serve to skew these respondents from a normative voter profile. However, it should be remembered that the central purpose in this study was to identify and measure a possible relative agenda effect more so than to represent a balanced picture of the population during a campaign.

Because of the panel design used, mortality was a considerable problem, given the vicissitudes of class attendance and cooperation. The complexity of indicies used further reduced the sample size because of missing component values for some subjects. Various controls such as interest in election campaigns or the debates and partisan affiliation strength could have been used to more rigorously control the relationships examined had the sample size permitted.

With little doubt, then, relative agenda effect as an explication of congruency needs refinement and elaboration, and certainly a larger and more representative sample as a test base. But the decided agenda effect over a campaign by

one's candidate of choice suggested here strongly indicates that we need to better understand how this mechanism works. This need is especially strong given the concern of news media and campaign advisers that their efforts bring the public to their agenda.

TABLE 1: Showing mean agenda congruency by candidate across 4 survey times by candidate preference*.

	MEAN AGENDA CONGRUENCY	TIME 1 Pre Debates	TIME 2 Post 1st Debate	TIME 3 Post 2nd Debate	TIME 4 Post Election
Reagan Voters (n=35)	Reagan	2.029	2.571	1.429	2.114
	Carter	2.686	3.371	2.143	2.657
	Anderson	3.314	3.055	2.571	2.829
Carter Voters (n=43)	Reagan	3.093	3.093	2.558	2.977
	Carter	2.279	2.997	1.884	2.465
	Anderson	2.442	2.814	2.070	2.767
Anderson Voters (n=42)	Reagan	2.381	3.122	2.667	3.452
	Carter	2.143	2.927	2.214	3.095
	Anderson	1.690	2.366	1.643	2.643

Differences of approx..725 = $p \leq .05$ for Reagan voters; .644 = $p \leq .05$ for Carter voters; .606 = $p \leq .05$ for Anderson voters.

* for respondent's chosen candidate

TABLE 2:

Showing relative voter's vs. perceived candidate effect in instances of congruency between 2nd and 3rd surveys. Increasingly negative values suggest greater voter's agenda effect, while increasingly positive values indicate greater perceived candidate agenda effect.

RELATIVE AGENDA EFFECT

	Reagan	Carter	Anderson	Approx. N
Reagan Voters	-1.100	-0.947	-0.947	19
Carter Voters	-1.682	-1.950	-2.438	20
Anderson Voters	-1.318	-1.273	-1.783	20

A mean difference of approx. 1.4 = p. $\leq$ .05

TABLE 3: Showing mean difference in relative agenda effect index by* (a) information source use for election information and debates, (b) attitudes toward information sources, (c) interest and attitudes toward debates, and (d) time vote decision was made.

	Mean 1	(n)	Mean 2	(n)	t Value	Signif.
Information Source Use						
View Debates on TV	(No) -2.103	29	(Yes) -1.629	27	-0.55	.590
Read Election info. in Press	(No) -3.571	14	(Yes) -1.359	39	-2.25	.029
Listen to Campaign Ads	(No) -2.142	7	(Yes) -1.553	56	-0.43	.666
Talk with Friends & on Vote	(No) -3.182	11	(Yes) -1.330	51	-1.67	.101
Attitude to Information Sources						
Camp. Ads Changed Mind On Issues	(No) -1.636	44	(Yes) -1.562	16	-0.07	.941
Judge Cand. by Acts More than Words	(Disagree) -1.878	33	(Agree) -1/555	27	-0.36	.717
Can't Believe What Candidates Say	(Disagree) -2.250	28	(Agree) -1.281	32	-1.07	.293
TV Ads Help Me Know Candidates	(Disagree) -2.262	42	(Agree) -0.500	18	-1.88	.065

Table 3, continued.

Attitude to Debates						
Interest in Debates	(Strong) -2.000	29	(Weak) -1.428	21	-0.57	.590
Debates Change Mind on Candidates	(No) -1.200	25	(yes) -3.133	15	1.98	.055
Debates Change Mind on Issues	(No) -1.866	30	(Yes) -2.272	9	0.29	.770
Debates Help Make Candidate Choice	(Disagree) -1.500	24	(Agree) -1.692	39	0.22	.828
Debates Help Make Candidates Choice	(Disagree) -1.250	20	(Agree) -1.975	40	0.78	.440
Time Pres. Choice						
	(> Month Ago) -1.625	16	(≤ Month) -1.416	24	-0.18	.861

* for respondent's chosen candidate

NOTES

1. The authors wish to thank Prof. Herbert Strentz, Dean, Drake University, School of Jounalism and Mass Communication, for allowing access to his classes and for managing much of the field work, and Barbara Bowes for her able assistance with data processing.
2. The sample involved in the 1976 campaign study differed in several significant respects from that employed in 1980. The earlier sample was larger (n = 250), but was not a true panel study. This latter difference ruled out the kind of relative agenda effect calculation used for the 1980 data.
3. The questions used to assess agenda congruency were as follows:

   "We'd like to know what issues you feel are central to the presidential campaign and the debates among Anderson, Carter and Reagan. Look over the list below. Are there any issues left out? If so, add them in the blanks at the bottom of the list. Then, indicate on the scales the importance you personally place on each issue. Mark the scale position closest to your feelings with an 'X'."

   After the respondent finished this task, he or she was asked:

   "Now, go back through the list, indicating how you think Anderson would honestly rate the importance of the

issues on the list. Mark your estimate with an 'A' for each scale. Do the same for Carter and for Reagan, marking their ratings with a 'C' and an 'R' respectively."

Respondents did add a few issues, but so infrequently that they were not incorporated into the analysis. The issues used were: controlling inflation, honesty in government, government spending, secure energy/oil supply, environmental protection, jobs/full employment, equal rights/civil rights, effective foreign policy.

4. The resulting drop in eligible respondents was substantial (remaining n = approximately 65) and plagued the stability of several measures yet to be discussed with high measurement error.

Figure 3:

Hypothetical example of relative agenda effect between the voter's (P) agenda and his perceived candidate's (PC) agenda in attaining increased congruency over time. This example shows greater agenda shift by the voter, resulting in a candidate agenda effect. Greater agenda shift by the candidate indicates voter's agenda effect.

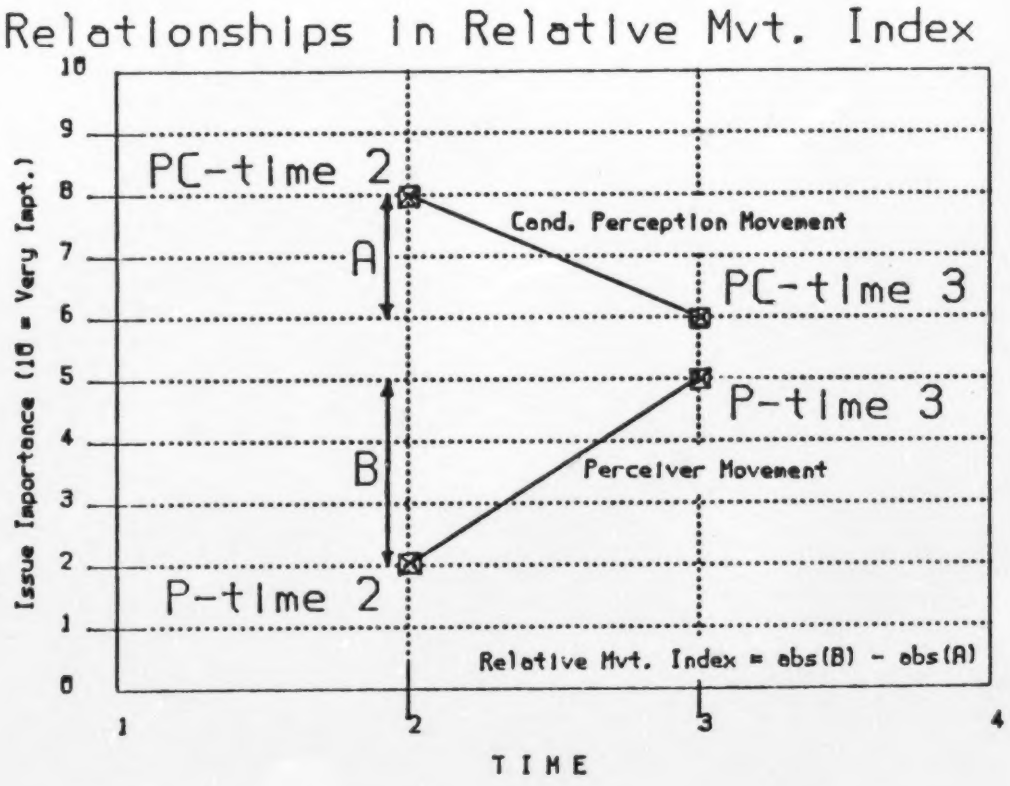


Figure 1.: Congruency with Ford and Carter on Issue Importance Across Four Survey Periods.[4]

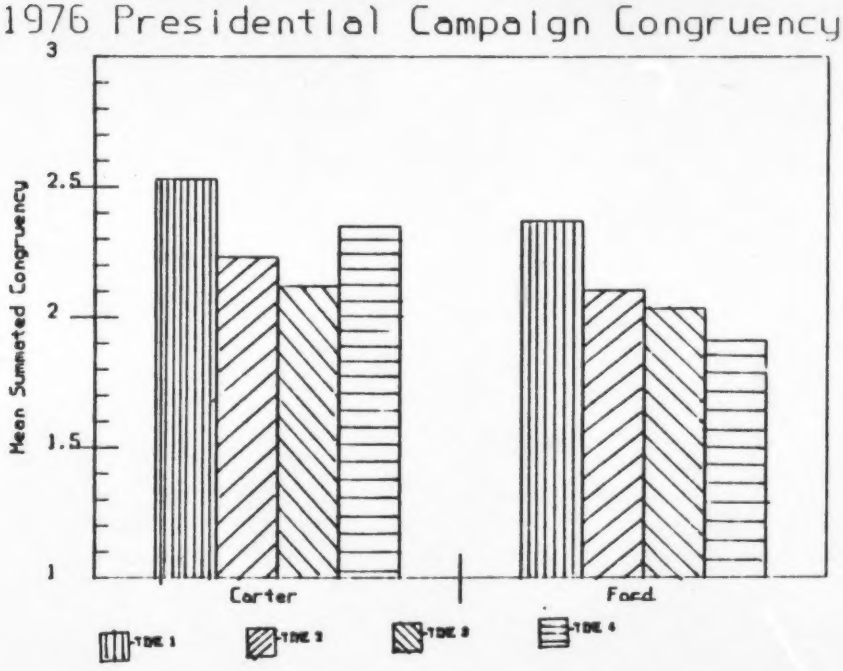
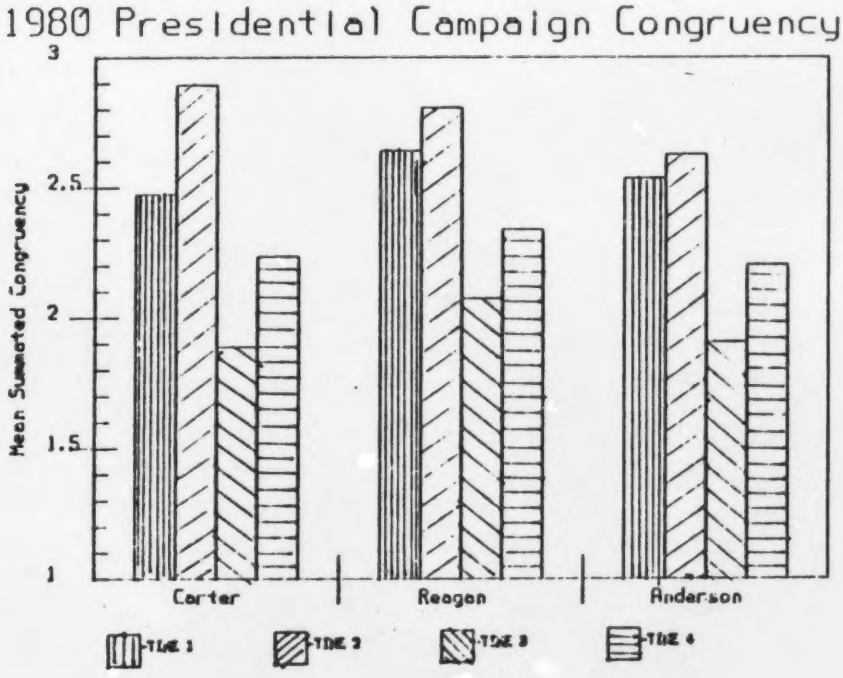


Figure 2.: Congruency with Carter, Reagan and Anderson Across Four Survey Periods.[4]



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